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THE RELIGIOUS LIFE OF THE COLLEGE STUDENT

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Whenever one attempts to study the religious life of any group of individuals, he is confronted at once with the intangibility of the problems presented. Religious experience is a matter that enters so vitally into the whole of life that any statement concerning it is liable to be partial and misleading. Moreover, on account of its being so bound up with the inner experiences of life, people discuss it with reluctance. Any investigation, therefore, into the religious status or condition of a given section of society must deal largely with the institutions or organizations through which this religious life is expressed. Statistics may often be misleading, and may fail to give an adequate view of the situation; but they do nevertheless show the tendencies, the scope, and in some measure the social results of the religious activity of the particular group in question.

In the following paper it is proposed to discuss the religious life of a certain section of society. The field chosen is the state universities and certain of the larger colleges on a Christian foundation in the West and Middle West. The field is narrowed to these limits because the problems presented are somewhat different from those of the smaller denominational colleges of the same section, and of the large and small colleges of the East. The institutions investigated include fourteen state universities, four colleges on Christian foundation, and one independent endowed college. The male attendance at these colleges comprises approximately 65 per cent. of the undergraduate men students in the thirteen states represented, according to the 1903 *Report* of the Bureau of Education. In a second article the agencies used for cultivating the religious life in these institutions will be considered, especially the work of the Young Men's Christian Association.

Concerning the general religious atmosphere of these colleges some idea can be obtained from the statistics gathered by President

Angell in 1890 in regard to the faculties of state universities. The percentage of faculty men in state institutions at that time having church membership was 71.¹ There is no reason to believe that the number has declined since that time. The percentage in the colleges on a Christian foundation will be somewhat higher, in two representative institutions of this class investigated the percentage being 90. President Draper, formerly of the University of Illinois, in speaking of the religious life in state universities (the same applying in every respect to that of the other colleges included in this discussion), says:

The fact doubtless is that there is no place where there is a more tolerant spirit or freer discussion of religious questions, or a stronger, more unrestrained, and healthier religious life, than in the state universities.

Further information on the same point is furnished by the statistics of state universities and Presbyterian colleges published by Professor Kelsey, of the University of Michigan, in 1897. From this we find that the percentage of undergraduate men who were church members in the state universities ranged from 48.9 to 68.1, the larger number of institutions registering between 55 and 57 per cent. Recent returns indicate that practically the same figures hold today. The number in some of the colleges on Christian foundations is considerably higher, one institution registering as high as 95 per cent., but the larger number running from 60 to 80 per cent. When on the basis of Professor Kelsey's statistics we add to these figures the large number of adherents, the percentage of undergraduate men who have no definite church connection or preferences falls to approximately 15 in the state universities, and somewhat lower in most of the colleges on Christian foundation. It is needless to say that these figures indicate that the large colleges of the West and Middle West are far from being "godless institutions."

The problems that surround life in the institutions are of two sorts: first, those psychical problems that belong to the latter half of the adolescent period of life, and, second, those social problems growing out of the peculiar social conditions of the college environment. We shall deal with the last-mentioned first.

The first of these to be noted is the complete change in environ-

¹ *Andover Review*, Vol. XIII, p. 365.

ment which takes place when the young man enters college. With two or three exceptions, all the colleges considered in this discussion draw by far the largest number of students from the rural districts and smaller towns. The young man is taken away from home surroundings, from boyhood friends, in the larger number of cases from church connections, and in nearly every case from a relatively simple social life, and plunged into an exceedingly complex environment. He is freed from old-time restraints and subjected to few new ones; he is made to feel that his destiny lies in his own hands; he comes into contact for the first time in his life with many things that were not previously dreamed of in his philosophy. How shall he choose the best sort of friends—for there are manifestly all kinds to be found in the cosmopolitan life of the college? How shall he assume the responsibility of self-control in place of external control? How shall he adjust himself to the new and strange complexity of social requirements? These are questions of the greatest moment, and upon the answer to them depend many of the issues of his college career and after-life.

From the nature of the case, members of the faculty can help him little. On the whole, it may be said that he ought not to be helped too much. These are problems the solution of which transforms the youth into the man. If an attempt is made to solve them for him, it must end either in failure to accomplish any results whatever or in producing a weakling unfit to battle with the world's problems. On the other hand, if left entirely to his own devices, in the majority of cases the adjustment must be for a long time incomplete; in which case the student loses much of the value of the college life, or there is a maladjustment which influences for the worse his whole after-life. There is manifestly great need of some agency which will help supply new friendships in place of the ones broken; which will offer an opportunity for the continuation of the religious life at this the most critical period in the moral and religious history of the individual; which will in a systematic manner help the student to interpret the meaning of the new social environment.

In the next place, the student is confronted with the comprehensiveness of the college environment. Although in nearly all the colleges under consideration there is no dormitory life for the men,

their lives nevertheless are led entirely within the college atmosphere. Outside social, religious, or intellectual interests have no part in the student life.² In the atmosphere of the college he lives and moves and has his being. Any moral and religious influence that touches him must do so within this area. It must, moreover, be organized and propagated by those who live the same life, breathe the same air, and understand from a daily experience the same problems.

A third factor which greatly influences the religious life of the college is the large place given in the college of today to social interests. It is not in point here to inquire whether or not too much importance is given to this side. The fact is that it does occupy a very prominent place in the life of most college men, and from all appearances it is to continue to do so for a considerable time at least. Moreover, the fact that all these institutions are coeducational increases the amount of social activities. The social and religious interests are to a certain extent rivals here, and in the absence of wise leadership they may, and often do, become hostile to each other, to the great detriment of both. The problem is to make them complementary rather than alternative. This is to be done, first, by raising the social activities to a high moral plane, which can be accomplished only by the leaders of the religious interests also taking an active part in the social life of the college; and, second, by introducing the social element into the religious activities, so that the time for the development of the religious life may be found without forcing the student to choose between the two. Right at this point of the harmonization of the two lie most of the vital problems of both the religious and the social life of colleges; and to the failure of a proper harmonization many college religious organizations can trace their failure, partial or complete, and many social organizations their tendencies toward injurious influences.

Another factor which greatly influences the religious life of colleges is the intensity of the intellectual application. For, notwithstanding the newspaper reports of football and of social functions, it is pretty generally conceded that the serious purpose of the college

² In this and the subsequent instances the word "social" in this paper, connoting a special interest distinct, for example, from the religious, is employed in its narrower and popular meaning rather than that employed by social science.

course is study. Professor Kelsey, of the University of Michigan, writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1897, says:

The chief danger to student life in the collegiate and university period lies not, as is so often assumed, in the tendency of those naturally weak or wayward to be led astray by evil companions, but rather in the fact that the highest and best minds, the most earnest and candid souls, are from their devotion to the pursuit of knowledge likely to suffer a deadening of the spiritual consciousness. Some students who have great capacity for large service to humanity may thus go forth with the highest part of their natures undeveloped, lacking that spiritual force which multiplies tenfold the influence of every kind of ability for good work in the world.

That this is an accurate description of a very real danger cannot be questioned, and from the very quality of the men whom it confronts most strongly arises the immense significance of the situation. Surely, if ever, we have need today that the minds that live closest to the heart of science be also imbued with a spiritual power. Modern ideals will not stop short of the whole man; and surely, if there is any place where this wholeness can and should become a working ideal, it is in the college. There is imperative need, therefore, for some agency within the college to stand for this completeness of development, and by a wise and sympathetic activity lay sufficient emphasis on the spiritual things of life.

We turn, in the next place, to those problems which have their origin in the peculiar psychic phenomena of the college period. The age of entrance for by far the larger number of men is between eighteen and nineteen years. Here also falls the average entrance age. This is the age commonly designated as the beginning of the third and last stage of adolescence.³ The young man has passed through those earlier stages in which the greater number of conversions and spontaneous awakenings, and periods of mental and emotional turmoil, take place. At about eighteen the experiences become more mature and have a greater degree of insight. Says Starbuck:

At this time the latent energy which has been stored up during the activities of childhood and even during racial life becomes actualized and expressed in terms of the higher psychic life.⁴

³ See Clouston, *Neuroses of Development*, pp. 110 ff.; also Starbuck, *Psychology of Religion*, pp. 207, 208.

⁴ *Op. cit.*; p. 208.

As conversion and turmoil were the characteristics of the earlier stages, so doubt is the peculiar characteristic of the last period of adolescence. Starbuck found that 79 per cent. of the cases of men whom he studied had passed through a pretty distinct period of doubt, which was generally violent and intense.⁵ Concerning the causes of these doubts there are two explanations offered: the one maintaining that they are to be found in the environment—that is, in the studying of science, philosophy, history, and kindred subjects; the other, that they are the peculiar phenomena of this period of life. The real explanation is probably to be found in a conjunction of the two. Most men trace the beginnings of their doubts to the questions raised by these studies. On the other hand, as Starbuck points out,⁶ doubts often spring up without any apparent cause, showing that the mind is at least ripe for them at this period. The important thing for us here is that the great majority of men in their college period do pass through such a stage.

This period can best be described by considering four of its chief characteristics. The first of these is that the youth refuses to accept many of the dogmas and creeds that he has hitherto held. The religious beliefs that once were accepted without question as final and ultimate statements are at first questioned, and then for the most part repudiated. In many cases this goes to the extent of denying the validity of any of his previous religious experiences. The cause for all this is found in the second of the characteristics—predominance of the intellectual interest. That there is a physiological basis for this is seen in the fact that the cognitive brain-centers are greatly enlarged at this time of life. The youth has come into a new and larger world of ideas. He is troubled at the apparent conflict between authority and reason, and there is no doubt as to which will win in his mind at this time. He has believed that the religious experience is bound up with some particular dogma. The scientific spirit will not allow the dogma to exist as an adequate conception of truth, and so the creed is repudiated; and with it goes often all conscious connection with the religious world. He is jealous of his intellectual integrity. Anything that actually or apparently asks him to give up any of it will not be tolerated.

⁵ See also Coe, *The Spiritual Life*, pp. 58 ff.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 234, 235.

In fact, this thirst for wholeness which marks this period of life is at once its hope and its source of unrest. Coe has pointed out⁷ that this yearning for the absolute is attached to the conscience at this period as well as to the intellect: the process that is going on is nothing less than a transition from external to internal religion. What has been embodied in the creeds, though it ultimately may have been based upon reasonable principles, has heretofore been handed down to the youth as an authority. Now these must come before the bar of his own reason and justify themselves. He will later come to see the value of and the necessity for many of the things which he now repudiates. But if they ever are to be anything more than meaningless words to him, he must overthrow them as expressions of external authority and reconstruct them from his own inner experience.

A third characteristic is the wide disparity between the ideal and the ability to achieve. "There is," says Starbuck, "a breach between the motor areas in the brain and the ideational centers. One is thrown back helplessly, and the chasm between knowing and doing becomes greater instead of less."⁸ This leads to a feeling that one is out of all harmony with religious principles, and there is a marked tendency to throw the whole thing to the winds, in utter discouragement. If it stopped at this point, the outcome must be unfortunate indeed. But fortunately this is but the darkness before the dawn. It is a preliminary struggle before the birth of a larger and truer self, and under proper guidance may be made use of in leading the religious consciousness out upon a higher plane than ever was conceived of in the days of external authority.

A final characteristic is the tendency of the ethical instinct to abide through all the storms of doubt. The old sanctions of a moral conduct are shattered, but there persists somehow a vague feeling that the moral has its basis in the very laws of the universe; and upon this sure foundation it is possible to erect a wider and stronger spiritual consciousness when the clouds have cleared from the mental horizon of the student.

These four characteristics suggest the way of dealing with doubt; for manifestly there is need at this point of sane, wise, and sympa-

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 63 ff.

⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 257.

thetic help, if ever in the life of any individual. First, the tendency to doubt must not be reckoned as immoral or irreligious. The universality of the phenomenon marks it as an inevitable one in the lives of most men. In the next place, a perfectly candid attitude may be assumed on the part of those who have passed through the experience. If religious leaders and friends who are known to accept the fundamental principles of historical Christianity will but assume an open, frank, and fearless attitude toward all the questions of the doubter, many of his difficulties must disappear. All of the questions that will come up in his mind can never be answered, but if he sees a perfect frankness to view them in the light of all available evidence, many of his fears and doubts will fade into air. Finally, the greatest help is to be found in leading the doubter into some form of active religious service. To do something, and to judge his theories by their usefulness for actual living, is the greatest cure for the bewilderment and morbidness of the doubter. He needs, above all else, greater ability to express, to achieve, to accomplish something. By losing himself in some form of actual service he forgets his difficulties, and when he comes to himself he finds many of his problems have solved themselves.

To summarize now, we may state the problems that lie before any agency in promoting the religious life of college men: (1) It must provide a religious environment into which the student may come, as he passes from the home into the complex life of the college; where he may find helpful friendships, and where he can find sympathy and direction from older members of the community in becoming adjusted to the new conditions and duties of life. (2) This agency must be organized within the college and be manned by those who are familiar with the problems. (3) It should recognize the social interests of the community, and effect such a harmonization of the religious and the social interests as will raise the moral plane of the latter and give the student opportunity to engage in both, consistently. (4) It should secure a systematic cultivation of the religious life by providing religious instruction adapted to the peculiar needs of the college period and by offering definite forms of religious activity.